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ABSTRACT

Common practices regarding competency testing for handicapped students have ranged from inclusion and exclusion to selective inclusion based on handicapping condition. Factors involved in deciding about minimum competency testing include conceptualizing the categories of handicaps into two groups: students who require a modified learning environment, and students who require a modified curriculum and instructional goals. Consideration of the purpose for competency testing must also be made. The current widespread practice of linking high school graduation certification to competency test criteria may be harmful to handicapped students in terms of damage to self concepts as well as to future employment opportunities. Constitutional and statutory guarantees exist against unfair and discriminatory practices. (CL)

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Minimum Competency Testing And The Handicapped

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Minimum Competency Testing and the Handicapped: Major Issues

Introduction

Minimum competency testing for grade-to-grade promotion or as a prerequisite for high school graduation is an educational concept that has swept the nation in recent years. Competency testing is one of the most explosive as well as controversial issues on the educational scene today (Brickel, 1978; Haney and Madaus, 1978). In spite of controversy, the movement has received strong support from numerous legislators and state boards of education. According to a report by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (1979), as of January 1, 1979, thirty-six (72%) have some form of competency testing for elementary and secondary students. Seventeen of those states (34%) link competency testing with high school graduation. An attempt for new or additional legislation is expected in several states (Neill, 1979). This influential educational movement represents a major practice with serious implications for many handicapped students. The potential adverse effect is great.

A review of the literature revealed an abundance of information focusing on minimum competency testing and the non-handicapped. Very little has been written regarding minimum competency testing and handicapped students. There is a critical need for serious deliberation of major issues specific to the handicapped and competency testing. Several important issues have surfaced but have not been sufficiently examined to provide substantive guidance in implementing competency testing program schemes that do not perpetuate degradation of the handicapped and deny them equal opportunity for an "appropriate" education and employment.

The general issue of how handicapped students should be accommodated in the competency testing movement is a major concern that remains unresolved. Specific concerns regarding (1) whether minimum competency testing programs should include or exclude handicapped students and if so, to what extent, (2) what criteria or rationale should be used in determining whether handicapped students should be included or excluded from comprehensive competency testing programs, and (3) major implications of minimum competency testing for the handicapped are critical issues that warrant consideration. Unless care is taken to assure that programs are designed and implemented in a fair and non-discriminatory manner, the popular movement is almost certain to have a negative impact on the lives of many handicapped students.

Should the Handicapped Be Included or Excluded

The first question often asked regarding the handicapped and competency testing is whether handicapped students be required to proficiency minimum competency tests as required of non-handicapped students. The issue is complex and extremely debatable. While competency testing cannot be opposed in principle, it is highly questionable in terms of the practicality and fairness of categorically requiring handicapped students to meet the same proficiency requirement as the non-handicapped. The issue is of growing concern as an increasing number of school districts link high school graduation to competency test requirements.

Heterogeneity of the handicapped population prohibits any reasonable expectation that handicapped students be either systematically included or excluded from competency test requirements. Such an approach would be narrow in focus and insensitive to vast differences in handicapped students. Students with widely varying capacities and limitations are capable of

different levels of educational achievement. Equal expectation of students with significantly unequal capacities would be unfair.

It is reasonable to expect that competency testing might apply to the handicapped, but only within a framework that is meaningful to each student. Decisions regarding the nature and extent of participation in competency testing programs should be made on an individual basis for handicapped students. Some handicapped students may be treated unfairly if they are excluded from participation in the same competency test required of the non-handicapped. Other handicapped students may be subjected to unfair treatment unless differential standards of required proficiency are established as a basis of expected participation in competency testing programs established for the non-handicapped. Other handicapped students may be treated unfairly unless they are totally exempted from all testing requirements established for the non-handicapped. Advice is needed on how to establish differential standards of competency test proficiency for handicapped students that can be used as a basis for making promotion and graduation decisions that do not penalize the students.

It is interesting to note that there has been limited concensus among the several states that have mandated competency testing prior to high school graduation, in terms of whether to include or exclude handicapped students in competency testing programs. Three common practices have emerged as follows: (1) inclusion of all handicapped in competency testing programs, (2) exclusion of all handicapped from competency testing programs, and (3) selective inclusion or exclusion based on handicapping condition. According to the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (1979), of the seventeen states that now require competency testing prior

to high school graduation, six (35%) require all or selected categories of handicapped students to take the competency test (see Table 1). Eleven (65%) of the states have not specified if handicapped students are included or excluded from the competency test requirement.

What Criteria Should Be Used to Determine Accommodation of the Handicapped?

Several factors should be considered before a decision is made regarding the accommodation of handicapped students in minimum competency test programs. The inclusiveness of the phrase "handicapping students, heterogeneity within each handicap category, widely varying curriculum and instructional goals specific to handicap individuals, and the purpose of competency testing are important factors to consider when making decisions regarding competency testing and the handicapped.

It is important that state legislators, state boards of education, and local school officials recognize the inclusiveness of the phrase "handicapped students." As specified by The Education For All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, there are eleven categories of handicapped students--speech impaired, mentally retarded, hard-of-hearing, deaf, visually handicapped, seriously emotionally disturbed, orthopedically impaired, other health impaired, deaf-blind, multi-handicapped and specific learning disabilities. The phrase "handicapped students" then is too broad to begin to generalize about competency testing and the handicapped as a group.

When planning for the accommodation of handicapped students in competency testing programs it is helpful to conceptualize the categories of handicapped students as basically constituting two groups: (1) handicapped students that require a modification of the learning environment, and (2) handicapped students that require a modified curriculum and instructional goals.

For handicapped students that basically require a modification of the learning environment, curriculum and instructional goals are essentially the same as for non-handicapped students. The same competency test and proficiency standards required of the non-handicapped could be used with equity in making determination regarding high school graduation or grade promotion for these students. In some instances, there might be a need for differential assessment procedures appropriate for a particular handicapped student, as dictated by modification required in the learning environment. For example, a visually impaired student might take the same test as non-handicapped students but use a tape recorder instead of a paper and pencil assessment. Such a modification would not be of paramount significance if specific skill performance is the primary concern, not whether the student could take a paper and pencil test.

For handicapped students that require a modified curriculum and instructional goals, the educational program often differs noticeably from their non-handicapped peers. These handicapped students are generally characterized by lower achievement potential. Consequently, instructional goals focus on lower levels of skill development. Such modified educational programs result in an inadequate match between the handicapped student's program of instruction and level of item difficulty on the competency test. When competency test items do not reflect the content and level of instruction received by the handicapped student, then the test should not be applied with equity. One suggested approach would be to use the same competency test established for the non-handicapped but establish different standards of required proficiency for individual handicapped students. The

rationale for using differential standards of proficiency is that the procedure takes into consideration the differences in level of achievement potential between some handicapped students and their non-handicapped peers. Proficiency standards established for individual handicapped students should be used as a basis for deciding if a student has met the prerequisite for high school graduation and may receive a diploma.

For students with severe and profound handicaps, the educational program is so vastly different from their non-handicapped peers that the students would not begin to approach the development of skills needed to participate in the regular competency test program. Total exemption from competency test requirements would be appropriate for these students. The adverse effects of excluding the students would be minimal.

The use or purpose of competency testing is an important concern that should be considered when trying to determine whether handicapped students should be included or excluded from test requirements. If the competency testing program is for diagnostic and remedial purposes, then handicapped students should be exempt. Each Individual Education Program (IEP), as mandated by The Education For All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, define remediation for students based on diagnostic information. On the other hand, if competency testing is used to make graduation and promotion determination, a formal process should be used to establish expectations regarding the appropriate participation of each handicapped student. Individual determinations regarding each student could be made as a part of their required IEP and used as a basis for promotion and graduation decisions. Individual determinations should be the responsibility of the

IEP Planning Committee mandated by the Act. Such a procedure would include participation of the handicapped student where appropriate, the parent, educators, and administrative personnel. The approach would maximize participation in the decision-making process and decrease chances of the competency testing program having a penalizing effect on handicapped students.

Implications for the Handicapped

Meeting uniform competency test requirements as a prerequisite for a high school diploma is a potentially harmful practice that emerged with the competency test movement. The practice of awarding differential diplomas and certificates of attendance to handicapped students has been noted in several states. According to a report by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (1979), differentiated diplomas may be issued to handicapped students in fifteen states (30%), depending on local board decisions. Nine states (18%) issue special certificates of attendance, while seventeen states (35%) provide for local board discretion to issue such certificates. Possible legal implications of such practice are of increasing concern to many policy-makers.

The popular practice of linking high school graduation certification to competency test requirements is potentially harmful to handicapped students. Numerous students will undoubtedly suffer unnecessary humiliation as a result of test requirements that are unfair and discriminatory. It is likely that many handicapped students will drop out of school rather than suffer the humiliating experience and stigmatizing effect of receiving a differentiated diploma or certificate of attendance. Awarding a different diploma or certificate of attendance to the handicapped student

would have the effect of labeling the student as "incompetent." Greater feelings of unworthiness could be expected as a result of additional labeling. Labeling also affects the way the rest of society view and accept the handicapped. Post-secondary education training program and employment are likely to be adversely affected. Denial of a standard diploma based on failure of competency test could cause a number of economic and academic deprivations for the handicapped. Chances are great that the popular educational practice could create more social problems than benefits to society.

In an indirect manner, unfair and discriminatory competency testing practices challenge the legitimacy of special education programs for handicapped students. The implication seems to be if handicapped students are not able to achieve skills commensurate with their non-handicapped peers, perhaps special education programs are of limited value in terms of preparing the students to succeed as adults. Such an implication is questionable as no one seems to know what skills are needed to succeed as an adult. There is some speculation that not all skills needed to succeed are basic skills. Many high school programs for the handicapped aim at developing social, interpersonal, and vocational skills. Primary focus on academic skills would restrict the handicapped student to an impractical curriculum. Many handicapped students would stand a chance of becoming casualties of an educational practice that was conceived with the non-handicapped student in mind.

Conclusions

The development of competency test program schemes that take handicapped students into serious consideration is a major challenge to the

success of the competency testing movement. Treatment of the handicapped has improved tremendously in recent years as society has evidenced a sense of moral obligation to help persons who have deficiencies that prevent them from achieving an ordinary level of competency. Consequently, it is not likely that an educational practice that does not have practical application and meaningful implications for the handicapped will receive sanction from society.

The Federal Constitution, statues, and regulations provide handicapped students with special protection against unfair and discriminating practices. The Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution guarantees all citizens equal protection rights. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 extends to all handicapped persons protection from exclusion or denial of benefits, and discrimination under any program of activity receiving Federal financial assistance. The Education For All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 protects handicapped students from unfair educational practices. Whatever approach a state or local school district adopt to accommodate handicapped students in competency testing programs must meet the requirements of existing legislation.

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Table 1

States Requiring Handicapped Students

To Take Competency Tests

States	Handicapped Categories Required to Take Competency Test	Comments
California	all handicapped students	can adopt differential standards for learning disabled. A diploma is denied any student who cannot meet proficiency requirement.
Florida	speech and/or language impaired, visually impaired, orthopedically impaired.	mentally retarded automatically exempt and awarded a certificate of attendance. Mentally retarded can take the test if parents request it.
Maryland	all mainstreamed handicapped students.	
Massachusetts	individual decisions made by a core evaluation team.	conducting a pilot study to develop procedures for administering test to handicapped in a non-discriminatory manner.

Table 1 (Cont'd)

States	Handicapped Categories Required to Take Competency Test	Comments
New York	learning disabled, speech and/or language impaired, seriously emotionally handicapped, visually impaired, hearing impaired, orthopedically impaired, and multiple handicapped.	mentally incapable exempt.
Vermont	all handicapped students	developing guidelines to tailor IEP objectives so that competency requirements can be met on an individual basis.